DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 423 687 FL 025 490

AUTHOR Salies, Tania Gastao
TITLE Tracing Possible Roots of a Portuguese Accent in English.
PUB DATE 1998-00-00
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comparative Analysis; Contrastive Linguistics; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; *Interference (Language); Language Patterns; *Phonology; *Portuguese; *Pronunciation; Regional Dialects; Second Language Learning; *Suprasegmentals; Uncommonly Taught Languages
IDENTIFIERS *Portuguese (Brazilian)

ABSTRACT

Differences in the English and Brazilian Portuguese (BP) phonological systems that may lead to a slight accent in Brazilian learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) are examined. Segmental and suprasegmental features of the two systems are compared and contrasted, noting areas in which ESL learners may tend to substitute a BP segment for a closely-related English segment. Vowels, diphthongs, and consonants are inventoried in this way, and syllable structure (consonant clusters, syllable length and rhythm, and stress and intonation) are similarly explored. It is concluded that rhythm and stress are the greatest sources of difficulty for BP learners of ESL. Because these are major cues to meaning in English, teaching rhythm and stress is essential. If teachers demonstrate how foreground information is prominent and background information is unstressed in listening comprehension exercises, learners will develop metacognitive awareness of the fact and monitor their speech better. Extensive exposure to natural, everyday discourse is the best way for learners to develop sensitivity to the target language prosody. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 423 687

TRACING POSSIBLE ROOTS OF A PORTUGUESE ACCENT IN ENGLISH

Pontificia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro
Tânia Gastão Saliés

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Tania Gastao Saliés

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- ☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
- • Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

FL025490

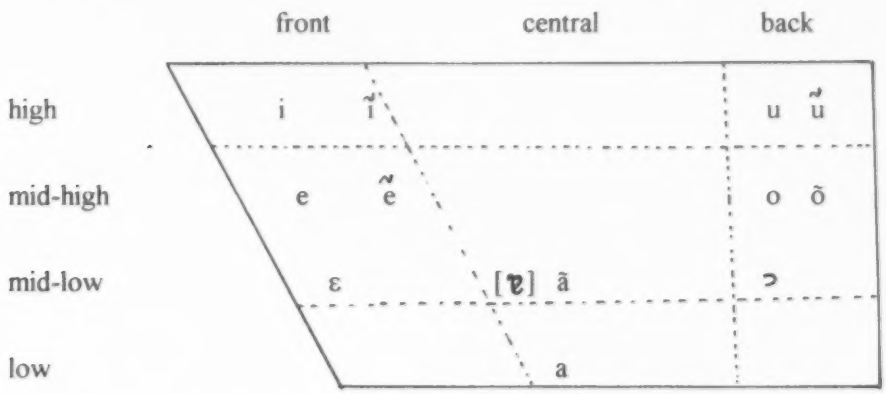
Tracing possible roots of a Portuguese accent in English

English and Brazilian Portuguese (BP) phonological systems are quite different. As indicated by Parkinson (1990: 263), Portuguese is rich in monophtongs and diphtongs and is very phonological (the orthography is closely related to pronunciation). In addition, BP is syllable-timed, presenting vowel reduction only at the allophonic level and few final consonants. The devices it uses to indicate stress and vowel quality (often redundantly) are various. For example, BP uses diacritics to indicate stress. These features, as pointed by Shepherd (1987: 90), give rise to a "Portuguese accent in English." This study addresses this topic and highlights possible problem areas for learners of English as a second language who are native speakers of Brazilian Portuguese.

However, before tackling the problem areas, I first briefly describe the segmental and suprasegmental features of BP and constrast them to English. In doing so, I combine the views of Cunha and Cintra (1985), Câmara (1977), Parkinson (1990), Shepherd (1987), Nicola & Infante (1991), as well as my own, as a native speaker. Then I explain the problem areas and offer some suggestions for EFL teachers who deal with native speakers of BP. Both the problems and the suggestions are supported by my teaching observations along the years.

Segmental Phonemes of BP

Vowel Inventory in BP



Therefore, there are five nasal vowels /ã, ẽ, ĩ, õ, ũ/ that occur before or after M or N, or as grammatical suffixes, and that are contrastive with their oral counterparts / a, ɛ, i, ɔ , u/ in open medial and final syllables. For example, ***mundo*** /'mũdu/ "world" vs. ***mudo*** /'mudu/ "dumb;" *ri* /Ri/ "laugh" vs. *rim* /Rĩ/ "kidney." Furthermore, three of them occur exclusively in oral contexts, and are classified as open vowels /ɛ, ɔ , a/, for ex., *pé* /pɛ/ "foot," *hora* /ɔr a / "time." The two of them that can be closed /e, o/ account for vowel aternations which regulate gender, nominalizations, verbalizations, and number. For instance, the adjective *formoso* /for'mozu/ "beautiful" becomes /form ɔ za/ in the feminine, the noun *governo* /go'vernu/ "government" becomes /go'vɛrnu/ "I govern," *almoço* / au'mosu/ "supper" becomes /au'm ɔ su/ "I have supper," *ovo* /'ovu/ "egg" becomes /' ɔ vus/ in the plural.

With regards to allophonic variations, according to Câmara (1977) BP has one vowel at the allophonic level [ɐ]. This vowel is a reduced or dull /a/ and occurs in post-tonic position (for example, *caneta* /kã'netɐ/ "pen," *casa* /'kazɐ/ "house;" or *poça* /'posɐ/ "poddle."

BP vowels, in general, are articulated very similarly to the English vowels /i, a, ɛ, u, ɔ/ and are not expected to cause any problems to Brazilians who learn English, except for vowel length. In BP /i/ is slightly shorter than in English, as in the words *lixo* /'liʃu/ "trash" and *livro* /'livru/. Exercises with rubber bands to visually represent vowel length can correct the slight deviation.

However, there are five English vowels that are not present in the BP vowel inventory, and which have no equivalents: /ɪ, ə, æ, ɝ, ʊ /. These are the vowels that we expect to cause problems to native speakers of BP who are learners of English. First of all, Brazilians tend to pronounce the /ɪ/ as an /i/, indifferently. For ex., "rich" becomes /ritʃ /, "it" becomes /it/, and so on. The substitution may cause major communication problems and generate misunderstandings when there are minimal pairs. This is the case of the words in the example (they enter in opposition with "eat" and "reach"). Therefore, the EFL teacher should point out that the / ɪ / sound is in-between the BP /i/ and /e/. I would also add that it would be helpful to explain or demonstrate how the / ɪ / sound is articulated (muscles relaxed, mouth relaxed, shorter, lower in intensity), and to give examples ot the problems the lack of distincion between / ɪ / and /i/ may bring. The best way to do this is to give examples of some verbal abuses that may derive from the lack of distinction between "sheet"

and "beach" and their counterparts with / ɪ /. In my experience as an EFL teacher, when students learn how and why, they tend to monitor their production more carefully.

Secondly, Brazilians who are learners of English tend to replace the phoneme / æ / by /a/ or /ɛ/, and "can't" becomes /kant/, "cat" becomes /kɛt/. This substitution is equally serious because it impacts communication (the vowel is contrastive between the affirmative and negative forms of the modal "can," for example). Again, the teacher should explain how the phoneme / æ / is articulated, show its characterists , and point out that it is closer to the open-stressed /ɛ/ as in the word "elétrico" /e'lɛtriku/, but still, higher in intensity. Again, examples of how the lack of distinction may cause misunderstandings are very helpful to raise awareness of this problem area as well.

Third, the schwa / ə / is constantly replaced by /a/, /i/, /e/, /o/ or /u/ because BP is syllable timed and presents few cases of reduced vowels. This is also a major problem because it reflects on the syllable structure, stress and intonation patterns of English and causes native English speakers to misunderstand Brazilian learners of English. A word like "justification" becomes /dʒ ʊstɪfɪ'keɪ ʃ ən/. Abstracting to the sentence level and discourse level, if a sequence of reduced vowels becomes full vowels, it sounds as another language, not English. I recommend then that the EFL teacher use words such as *pano* /'panu/ "cloth", or *cama* /'kãmɐ/ "bed" in which the vowel /a/ followed by /m/ or /n/ bears a sound very close to the schwa: the / ʌ /, except that it is mid-low and occurs exclusively in this distribution. Another suggestion would be to explain that English has full and reduced vowels, as opposed to BP, and that they are responsible for the English rythm. I normally demonstrate how many beats a sentence would have in English as opposed to the number of syllables. When students perceive that the number of syllables in English differs highly from the number of beats (or stressed syllables), they understand the importance of the schwa.

Another problem arises from the production of / ʌ / and / ʊ / as /u/. Both phonemes are not present in BP vowel inventory leading Brazilian learners of English to pronounce words like "mood" and "mud" as /mud/, indifferently. The lack of distinction often leads to miscommunication. Perception exercises, followed by communicative listening comprehension activities are very much indicated to this specific problem. Also, there is some ortographic interference (Portuguese ortography is generally phonological!) and words such as "hot", "cod" become /hɔt/ and /kɔt/.

Diphtongs in BP

	Front	central		back
high	iu			ui ũi
mid-high	eu ei	ẽi		ou oi õi
mid-low	ɛu ɛi			ɔi ɔu
low		ai	ãi	au ãũ

As indicated by Parkinson (1990:265), BP prsents a large inventory of phonemic diphtongs. Most have limited distribution. They are classified as rising (semivowel + vowel) and falling (vowel + semivowel). Respectively : /iu, ui, ũi/ as in the words *muito* /'mũitu/ "much", *auxílio* /au'siliu/ "assistence", and /au, oi, ei, ɔi, ɔu/ in the words *pau* /pau/ "stick," *brasileiro* /brazi'leiru/, *sol* /sɔu/. Therefore, diphtongs do not present themselves as a problem, and normally the /ia/ and /ea/, as in British English for "hear" and "hair," are the normal substitution for the "r" colored vowel in American English which is not present in the BP inventory. Even sequences of three vowel sounds (semivowel + vowel + semivowel) are quite common in BP--triphthongs (/waw, waj, wej/). For example, *saguão* /sa'gwãũ/ "lobby," *quais* /kwajs/ "which," *averigüei* /averigwej/ "I inquiried." The only problem triphtongs seem to cause to Brazilian learners of English is overpronunciation, as in the case of "sword" that ocasionally becomes /su'ɔ rd/, "guest" becomes /gw'est/, and "guardian" becomes /gw'ardiən/. A suggestion is to compare these words to BP words such as *queijo* /'keiʒu/ "cheese," *guerra* /'gɛRɐ/in which the semivowel is not pronounced.

Consonant Inventory in BP

The BP phonemic consonant inventory is less complex than the vowel inventory, and, basically, only the English /θ, ð / and /ɹ/ do not have equivalents in BP, presenting themselves as sources of negative transfer. The other English phonemes either have equivalents or near equivalents, and should therefore be perceived and articulated without much difficulty, as indicated by Shepherd (1987:92).

CONSONANTS IN BP

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Dental & alveolar	Palato-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Labio-velar	Glottal	Uvular
Nasal	m		n		ɲ				
Central-ficativ.		f v	s z	ʃ ʒ		[x]			[χ ʁ]
Central-approx.					j		w	[h]	[ʁ]
Lateral approx.			l		ʎ	R			
Trill			r						
Plosives	p b		t d			k g			

Note: /t/ and /d/ are realised as palato-alveolar affricates when followed by /i/ in the Rio de Janeiro dialect
/R/ is always realized as [h, x, χ, ʁ] in weak syllable final position and its articulation varies across BP dialects

The greatest difficulty the English inventory of consonants presents to Brazilian EFLers is the articulation of the dental fricatives /θ , ð /. Brazilian EFLers tend to articulate them as alveolar fricatives /s, z/ or as the labio-dental /f/, leading to misunderstandings since there are minimal pairs such as *think*, *sink* and *fink* with absolutely different conceptual structures. Or yet, in medial position, the dental fricatives are articulated as /t, d/, confusing *breathes* with *breeds* or *breezes*, as pointed out by Shepherd (1987: 92). Doubtless, this is a major and serious negative transfer due to differences in the languages' inventories. Similar to other difficulties I have discussed previously, the best way to approach the problem is to let EFL learners know that there are other words that enter in meaning opposition to the one they are trying to articulate. Miscommunication will certainly occur if they do not try to reach the correct articulation to the best of their abilities. Besides raising their awareness about possible communication problems, train them to articulate the dental fricatives. Ask learners to articulate a dental /t/, pushing air forward immediately after. Show them how you do it yourself. Traditional techniques such as lightening a match or placing a piece of paper in front of the mouth to watch it blow are helpful as well. Once they articulate the dental friction, it is advisable to teach them the difference between / θ / as in *thin* and / ð / as in *them*, asking them to voice the phoneme. I normally exaggerate the sounds in an effort to cater to their attention. Then I drill with minimal pairs, and perception exercises that contrast /t/, /s/, /f/ and /θ/, /d/, /z/, and / ð /.

A second difficulty Brazilian learners of English demonstrate in their quest to learn English are the phonemes /p/, /t/, /k/. Although they are present in the BP consonant inventory, in BP they are articulated with a slightly different tongue position and with NO ASPIRATION in all kinds of distributions. In English, on the other hand, all three sounds are aspirated initially, contrasting with /b/, /d/, and /g/. When BP speakers fail to make the distinction between *pear* and *bear*, *pin* and *bin*, *gum* and *come*, *gap* and *cap*, *down* and *town*, *done* and *tone* difficulties in communication may occur. For example, when I used to live in Tulsa, a Brazilian friend who was going to visit me had problems at the Dallas airport when trying to find the gate to Tulsa. The difficulty arose because he pronounced "Tulsa" without the aspirated /t/. Native English speakers would hear /d/ and say there was no such place in the USA. Therefore, learners should be taught to articulate an extra puff of air by inserting an /h/ in between the consonant and the vowel, pushing air forward ("p h ot"). Again, the traditional techniques are also helpful: have them place a piece of paper in front of their mouthes. If they hit the target articulation, the paper should flutter.

To a less extent, the alveolar approximant / ɹ / also offers difficulty to some Brazilians learners of EFL. When it does, it is articulated as [h] or [x], confusing red with head, right and hight (see Shepherd 1987:92). BP has not an equivalent nor a near equivalent sound in its inventory. In this case, only an explanation of how the sound is articulated may help learners to perceive the difference. I normally show them that the tip of the tongue cannot touch the roof of the mouth nor the bottom. If they begin with the sound "ahahahah" and curve the tip of the tongue backwords, they will get the correct or at least a close enough articulation.

There are other minor problems that characterize a Brazilian accent in English. Next, I list some of them:

1. In BP, the postvocalic /l/ is vocalized in some dialects, creating a series of falling diphtongs (for ex. *sal*. /sau/ "salt") Consequently, the dark /l/ in final position or before a consonant may be pronounced as /u/: /'bɔɬou/ for "bottle," /hiu/ for "heel."
2. In BP, final /s/ or /z/ are always pronounced /s/: *cais* /*kais*/ "dock" vs. *paz* /pas/ "peace" accounting for problems with English plurals (/wɷds/ for woods) and confusion between some words (/pis/ for both "peace" and "peas"). Note that in BP /s/ is always pronounced /z/ when intervocalic (/'kazɐ / for *casa*, "house"), and /c/ is always pronounced /s/ before /e, ɛ, ɪ, i/, enhancing the ability learners have to perceive and articulate "rice" and "rise."
3. In BP /b/, /g/, /k/, /p/, /t/ never occur in final position. So, there is a tendency to unvoice final voiced consonants (/b/, /g/) and to swallow the unvoiced ones. (According to my experience, the voicing of /b/ is the greatest difficulty). Therefore "cab" becomes /kæp/, and /p/ is effaced. Some hints about how vowel length works in English and its importance to the construal of meaning, and awareness raising about the fact that English voices its final voiced consonants are normally sufficient to correct the problem.
5. Though initial /h/ has not a phonemic equivalent in Portuguese, it is similar to [x], an unvoiced velar allophone of /R/ in initial position (*rato* /'xatu/ "mouse") in some dialects, or in final position such as in verbs of the first conjugation (*cantar* /kan'tax/. This facilitates the pronunciation of words such as "head, hear" and helps us to teach learners to differentiate those words from "red" and "ear."

6. The plosives /t/ and /d/ are realized as /tʒ, dʒ/ before /i/ in the Rio de Janeiro dialect (*tio Dino vende um lote* /tʒiu 'dʒinu 'vedʒi ũ 'lɔtʒi/ "uncle Dino sells a piece of land"). Therefore, there might be a tendency to articulate words like "team," as "cheam," but it is not a common transfer, according to my experience. On the contrary, in the case of these phonemes positive transfer helps the articulation of words like "chin" and "jam."

Suprasegmental Features of BP

Syllable Structure

Consonant Clusters

As pointed out by Shepherd (1987:92), the range of consonant clusters in English is much wider than in BP, causing either the insertion of extra vowels to help the articulation, or the deletion of some of the consonants. This is a major source of negative transfer since it alters syllable structure, rhythm, and, ultimately impacts communication.

Namely, Nicola & Infante (1991:26) indicate that in BP many clusters are digraphs. In other words, they represent one single phoneme. For example, "ch" equals /ʃ/, "lh" equals / ʎ /, "nh" equals /ɲ/, rr /R/ or [χ], "ss" equals /s/, "sc, sç, xc, xs" equal /s/. Others stand for two or more phonemes: bl, br, cl, cr, fl, fr, gl, gr, pt, pl, tr (initial and medial word position); gst, lm, ls, mb, mp, nc, nd, nt, nch, nsf, nsp, nst, rc, rz, rv, sp, sf, ldsp (medial word position). The pronunciation of many of these clusters is facilated by the syllable-time pattern of Portuguese as in the word *tungstênio* /tungs- 'te - nju/. Furthermore, there are no final consonant clusters, nor the initial str, skr, spl, spr, sch. Therefore , "bump" is many times realized as /bʌm/, "backed" becomes /bɛkəd/, "eight" becomes /eitʒ /, "strengths" becomes /strɛnks/, "twelfth" becomes /twelfs/, "bagged" becomes /bægəd/, "school" becomes /iskul/, "stop" becomes /istɔ p/ and so forth. Thus, there is a tendency to create syllables that do not exist in English, altering the stress pattern.

Either by inserting vowels in between consonants or deleting a consonant, students are simplifying the syllable structure of English. Because this problem seems to derive from the L_1 syllable structure, it is necessary to demonstrate how pronunciation may affect meaning in English (mainly when grammatical suffixes for past tense, plural, possessive forms are swallowed). To help learners reach the target structure, I normally give examples and then drill by means of word boundary exercises ("this treat"→ "street"; feel down → "field").

Syllable Length and Rythm

As I h ve mentioned in the introduction to this study, BP is syllable-timed, like Spanish. Consequently, syllables are assigned equal length, and vowels are equally full, except for word final position when there is considerable reduction of atonic final vowels. Also, as Parkinson says (1990:167), epenthetic vowels are counted as full syllables, and acronyms such as *PUC (Pontificia Universidade Católica)* are articulated as /ˈpuki/, with 2 syllables and two beats. Thus, the rythm of Brazilian Portuguese is determined by the number of syllables present in an utterance.

Consequently, speakers of BP generally have great difficulty to articulate vowels and syllables with different lengths, and native speakers have great difficulty in comprehending them. There is a tendency to insert vowels in between doubled consonants, or wherever it is necessary, to make up a new syllable and to facilitate articulation. Sentences like "this stop" may become / ðis istˈɔ pi/; "at that time" may become /ˈæti ðæti taimi/ (see Shepherd, 1987:93, for a detailed discussion)

Stress and Intonation

As claimed by Parkinson (1990:267), in BP users can predict stress, in most words, by means of complex grammatical and morphophonological rules, as opposed to the free-stress pattern of English. Normally, stress in BP is indicated by a series of diacritics (´ ^ ~ ` ¨) and falls on the penultimate syllable (or the final syllable if the syllable is closed by a consonant other than the inflectional /z/, or if it is closed by a diphthong or nasal vowel). In English, it is just the opposite. 90% of the two-syllable nouns have stress on the first syllable; compound words are stressed in the first syllable; and words formed by suffixation (except for "ation" and those of anglo-saxon origin) carry stress in the syllable before the suffix.

These facts about BP may lead to several pronunciation difficulties. For example, two-syllable words generally receive stress in the second syllable, ("co'ffee" instead of " 'coffee); nouns and verbs are not generally contrasted (" 'record" vs. re'cord); three syllable words receive stress on the penultimate or final syllable ("deve'lop" instead of "de'velop"); compounds are stressed in the second syllable ("drugs'tore", "break'fast", "business'man"); and words formed by suffixation normally receive stress on the penultimate syllable ("poli'tical"). These are problems that my students face with high frequency.

Furthermore, since BP is syllable-timed, there is no contrast between strong and weak forms. Every single word and syllable is clearly pronounced. Then, functional words, which are normally weak in current conversation, are never articulated as such. The immediate consequence is that native speakers cannot focus on the relevant information and tend to get lost , asking for repetition. Brazilian EFL learners, for their turn, cannot understand why they cannot be understood given that their English is so perflectly articulated.

With regard to intonation, the patterns of BP intonation conform to the English ones: that is, declarative and Wh-questions have falling intonation; yes-no questions and pauses within a sentence have rising intonation; complex sentences have separate intonation patterns; and a list of items receives rising/ falling patterns. In this respect, I have hardly had problemsn with my students. The only difference between the two languages are the question tags, as pointed out by Shepherd (1987:93). In BP, they are pronounced with a rising tune, irrespective of meaning.

Finally, as far as pitch is concerned, Portuguese has a narrower range of pitches than English. Therefore, BP speakers sound flat to English speakers, inconclusive, when producing declarative sentences. Communicative listening comprehension exercises help enormously to improve pitch in English. This, though, is a quest that takes time, and my experience indicates that only at the high-advanced levels may students perceive and produce the range of pitches that English offers.

Conclusion

According to my observations, rythm and stress are the greatest sources of difficulty for BP speakers who are learning English. Because they are major cues to meaning in English, teaching rythm and stress is a MUST. The EFL teacher should demonstrate how stress conveys meaning in English. If teachers actually demonstrate how foreground information is prominent and backgroung information is unstressed in listening comprehension exercises, learners will develop metacognitive awareness of the fact and better monitor their speech. Last, we can never overevaluate the role of linguistic experience in improving the articulation of segmental and supra-segmental features of the target language. Only by extensive exposure to natural, everyday language discourse do learners develop sensitivity to the target language prosody.

References

Câmara Mattoso, J. (1977). Estrutura da Língua Portuguesa [Structure of the Portuguese Language]. Petrópolis: Editora Vozes Ltda., 8ª ed.

Cunha, C. and Cintra, L. (1985). Nova Gramática do Português Contemporâneo [New Grammar of Contemporary Portuguese]. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Nova Fronteira.

Nicola, de J. & Infante U. (1991). Gramatica Essencial [Essential Grammar]. Sao Paulo : Editora Scipione Ltda.

Parkinson, S. (1990). Portuguese. In D.Pulleyblank, The World's Major Languages (pp.260-268). New York: Oxford University Press.

Shepherd, D. (1987). Portuguese speakers. In M.Swan & B. Smith, Learning English (pp. 90-93). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.